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E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/14/2018
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [AJ](#)
SUBJECT: AZADLIQ NEWSPAPER JOURNALIST STABBED;
HOSPITALIZED, BUT IN STABLE CONDITION

REF: A. BAKU 167
[1](#)B. BAKU 219

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ANNE E. DERSE PER 1.4(B,D).

[1](#)1. (SBU) On March 13 at approximately 2000, opposition Azadliq newspaper correspondent Agil Khalil was stabbed near his heart by four assailants. The 25-year old Khalil survived, although he lost a significant amount of blood and underwent minor surgery. As of COB on March 14, he remained in the Clinical Medical Center's Intensive Care Unit in stable condition. Khalil had been walking from the government printing house, where Azadliq newspaper's office is located, when he noticed two individuals following him. He broke into a run, but the assailants caught up with him, and were joined by two others; one assailant held Khalil while another stabbed him. Khalil told Azadliq newspaper Acting Editor-In-Chief Azer Ahmadov that he recognized one of his attackers. Khalil previously was beaten on February 22 while investigating reports that olive trees were being cut down and burned (ref a). Since the February 22 incident, Khalil has repeatedly reported that he believed he was being followed. He also reportedly rejected a 20,000 AZN offer to drop his criminal case.

[1](#)2. (SBU) On March 14, the Ambassador visited Khalil in the hospital, noting the USG's deep concern regarding the attack against him, and pledging that the USG would press the GOAJ to take immediate action on the case. Khalil started to recount what had happened to him, but was visibly weak and said only that he had been followed and then attacked. Outside of Khalil's hospital room, the Ambassador delivered strong remarks condemning the attack on Khalil and urging the government to take swift action to find and prosecute those responsible for the attack. (Full text of Ambassador's statement in paragraph eight.) After the Ambassador's visit, Press Council Chair Aflatun Amashov thanked Poloff for the Ambassador's visit and said the Press Council had urged the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Prosecutor General's Office to thoroughly investigate the case and prosecute the assailants.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The Ambassador spoke via telcon with Foreign Minister Mammadyarov on March 13 to register U.S. concern regarding the attack and to urge the GOAJ to take immediate action to investigate the incident, take appropriate follow-up measures, and publicly express the government's position on the attack. Mammadyarov promised to look into the case. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' Protocol Chief called the Ambassador to follow up, and noted that he had spoken to the police chief in the district where the attack had taken place, and had called the hospital to check on Khalil's condition. He emphasized that the attack was a "provocation," committed by individuals who wanted to cause

trouble for the government. The Ambassador reiterated the need for a public GOAJ statement noting that violence against journalists was unacceptable.

14. (C) Separately, PAO called Presidential Advisor Ali Hasanov on March 13 to register U.S. concerns. Having spoken with Hasanov about the initial attack on Khalil on February 25, PAO underscored the USG's deep concern that no action had yet been taken to apprehend the perpetrators. (NOTE: On February 25, Hasanov said that those responsible for the attack were "businessmen," not state officials -- implying that the GOAJ perhaps knew who they were. He said he expected them to be imminently apprehended.) Hasanov called back on March 14 to reassure PAO that the GOAJ would move quickly on this case. Hasanov claimed to have discussed the case with Presidential Chief of Staff Ramiz Mehdiyev and to have spoken with law enforcement authorities. He assured PAO that those responsible would be found and arrested. PAO also relayed the Ambassador's suggestion that a high-level GOAJ statement (from either Mehdiyev or President Aliyev himself) denouncing this crime would send a strong message of the GOAJ's intentions with regard to protecting media freedom. Hasanov promised to convey the suggestion.

15. (C) In a February 29 meeting, emboffs pressed Colonel Habil Alishanov, the Chief of the Ministry of Internal Affairs' (MIA) Main Investigation Unit, to take serious steps to investigate cases of violence against journalists. Because Khalil's case was still being investigated by a district police station, Alishanov was unaware of the incident. (NOTE: Emboffs called Alishanov's office to follow up; he did not return the call.) Alishanov, who is responsible for investigating attacks on journalists Nijat Huseynov, Bahaddin Haziyeu, and Fikret Huseynli, (other journalists' cases are with other government bodies,

depending on the persons involved and the exact charges) said these particular cases were closed because no new leads had been found within a three-month period. However, due to intense international attention, they were marked "special interest," meaning if new leads were found, the cases once again would be actively investigated.

16. (C) COMMENT: Following within days of the conviction of Azadliq Editor Ganimat Zahid on charges of "hooliganism" (ref b), the attack on Khalil is yet another serious blow to media freedom in Azerbaijan. Observers believe that this particular attack against Khalil is not part of a broader trend against opposition Azadliq newspaper; instead, observers believe that Khalil may have crossed powerful economic and/or criminal interests when reporting the destruction of the olive trees. His refusal to back down from either the investigation or his criminal charges against his alleged assailants were the likely reasons behind this attack. That said, the absence so far of a strong GOAJ statement condemning violence against journalists or any real action to investigate and prosecute those responsible for violence against journalists has sent a clear signal that these attacks are acceptable, resulting in an unacceptable climate of impunity.

17. (C) COMMENT CONTINUED: The Embassy will continue to press all appropriate levels of the GOAJ to take appropriate action in Khalil's case, and publicly make clear that violent attacks on journalists are unacceptable. The Ambassador will meet with the Acting Prosecutor General to review the cases of several other journalists -- including the still-unsolved 2005 murder of prominent opposition journalist Elmar Huseynov -- and press again for rigorous investigations and prosecutions of those responsible to the full extent of the law. We also recommend that USOSCE deliver a strong statement on Azerbaijan's media environment at the next Permanent Council meeting.

18. (U) Ambassador Derse's statement to the press follows:

We are shocked and appalled by this heinous crime. Our hearts go out to the young man and his family.

This attack and other violent attacks against journalists have created a climate of fear in an apparent effort to silence critical voices in Azerbaijan.

I know that all freedom-loving Azerbaijanis share our outrage and dismay at this cowardly deed, and agree that it is unacceptable.

Immediate action to apprehend and punish the perpetrators of this and other crimes will make clear that Azerbaijan is reversing this climate of fear and upholding the rule of law and freedom of speech.

End text of statement.
DERSE